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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NEW DELHI 002146

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TAGS: PGOV PTER PHUM PREL KDEM KISL IN

SUBJECT: JAMMU AND KASHMIR: VIOLENCE AND PROTESTS CONTINUE
AS GOI SEEKS COMPROMISES

REF: A. NEW DELHI 2109

1B. NEW DELHI 1799

1C. NEW DELHI 1684

Classified By: Political COunselor Ted Osius for Reasons 1.4 (B and D)

11. (C) Summary: Jammu and Kashmir remained on edge as violence sparked by the Amarnath land transfer controversy (reflets) continued into its second month. Over 50 people were injured on August 5 and rail and road traffic remained disrupted. The Prime Minister called an all-parties meeting on August 6 in search of a compromise formula that will stop the violence and defuse the tension. The protests in the Jammu region in response to the revocation of the land transfer, which were initially supported by Hindu nationalist organizations, have now gained broad support that cuts across party lines and includes local Congress Party officials. Unless the political and security environment improves rapidly, state assembly elections are likely to be postponed, striking a blow to Indian efforts to address longstanding Kashmiri grievances that led to almost two decades of militancy and terrorism in the state. The biggest gainers from the current instability in the state are the separatists, who were sidelined and on the defensive as recently as in May, but now have regained their voice of Kashmiri nationalism. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) also stands to gain as the controversy helps reinforce its charge that the Congress Party will sacrifice national interest to appease its Muslim vote bank. End Summary.

Second Month of Unrest

12. (U) Jammu and Kashmir remained tense this week as protests and violence over the Amarnath shrine land transfer controversy (reflets) entered its second month. The issue arose when the Jammu and Kashmir government transferred 100 acres of forest land in June to the Amarnath Shrine Board to establish shelter and facilities for primarily Hindu pilgrims to the shrine. Following protests in the Muslim-dominated valley, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government in Delhi cancelled the transfer order, which sparked a firestorm of protests in the Hindu-majority Jammu region. On August 5, at least 50 people were injured around the state in clashes between protesters and the police. Activists in the Jammu region attacked several government offices, injuring several policemen and setting fire to one police station and a government vehicle. The demonstrators ripped out a 1.5 kilometer section of the railway line linking Jammu to the rest of India. Curfews remained in place in Jammu city and several towns in the Jammu region. All commercial businesses in Jammu and Srinagar remained closed and transportation

disruptions have caused sporadic scarcity of some essential commodities. Five persons were injured in Srinagar as police used tear gas to control a stone-throwing mob agitating against Jammu protestors who had disrupted traffic on National Highway 1A linking Srinagar to Jammu and Delhi. There were reports that traffic on the highway had been intermittently restored on August 5 after days of blockade. Separatist Yasin Malik went on a "fast unto death" in Srinagar.

UPA: Desperately Seeking Solution

¶13. (U) Meanwhile in Delhi, the UPA government continues to urgently search for a compromise formula that will allow it to stop the erosion of hard-earned peace and prosperity gains of the last four years in Jammu and Kashmir. To that end, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh will convene an all-party meeting on August 6 to appeal to the broad spectrum of political groupings to help defuse the tense environment prevailing in the state. Earlier this week, the PM had dispatched Home Secretary Madhukar Gupta and Defense Secretary Vijay Singh to Jammu and Kashmir to assess the political and security situation in the state and advise on ways to restore normalcy. In Jammu and Kashmir, Governor N.N. Vohra appealed to the population to maintain communal harmony and ensure safety of life and property. Hardline separatist leader Syed Ali Shah Gilani was placed under house arrest. Some Hindu nationalist leaders from outside the state were prevented from visiting the Jammu region.

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BJP: Seeking Corrective Action

¶14. (U) The PM's proposed all-party meeting follows his August 4 phone call to BJP President Rajnath Singh in which the PM reportedly asked the BJP to join hands with the UPA government to help calm the state in the "national interest."

According to press reports, the PM told Rajnath Singh that the political turmoil in the state would serve to embolden India's "enemies." Last week, Sonia Gandhi had also spoken to Rajnath Singh. The PM and Sonia Gandhi also spoke last week with BJP leader L.K. Advani, who is reported to have told them that the UPA government must offer some initiative or "corrective action" to assuage residents of the Jammu region who were enraged at the revocation of the order to transfer land to the Amarnath Shrine Board. Foreign Minister and frequent domestic political trouble shooter Pranab Mukherjee will convene a meeting of the UPA allies to hammer out a consensus position prior to the PM's all-party meeting. The BJP leadership is also expected to huddle before the all-party meeting to refine its position and ensure all participants stay on message.

NC Offers Compromise

¶15. (U) The National Conference, one of the largest mainstream political parties in the state, has floated a compromise formula in which the 100 acres of land in question remains forest land, is not transferred to the Amarnath Shrine Board, but is turned over or leased to the Board each year for the two-month duration of the pilgrimage. The Jammu and Kashmir governor has offered to step down as chairman of the Amarnath Shrine Board and to support reconstitution of the Board such that only Jammu and Kashmir state residents can serve on it. It is not clear how the different political parties will react to these and other compromise formulae.

Jammu Uprising Cuts Across Party Lines

¶16. (SBU) While the Sangh Parivar organizations -- Hindu

nationalist groupings such as Shiv Sena, Bajrang Dal, Vishal Hindu Parishad, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sena -- were the first off the block to protest the revocation of the land transfer order, the movement has now broadened to include people from all political shades and stripes. Several Congress Party local officials have led protesters in the Jammu region. Congress Party stalwart and former cabinet Minister Karan Singh, who continues to be closely connected to the party leadership, urged the UPA government to address Jammu regions grievances. He called for the dismissal of the state governor. He also demanded that the PM invite to his all-party meeting the Amarnath Sangharsh Samiti, the umbrella organization that is coordinating the protests in the Jammu region. Some Jammu-based leaders of the People's Democratic Party and the National Conference, the two preeminent valley-based mainstream political parties, have resigned from their parties and joined the activists in protesting the land transfer revocation. Head of the Jammu bar association has come out strongly against the revocation of the land transfer. The Panthers Party leadership is on the front lines of the Jammu agitation.

Panthers: UPA Still Clueless?

¶7. (C) Panthers Party leader and former Jammu and Kashmir Education Minister Harsh Dev Singh told Poloff that his party has not been invited to the PM's all-party meeting on August 15. This would be a serious lapse on the part of the UPA because the Panthers Party continues to be a force in the Jammu region. Harsh Dev Singh was amused that the two large Tamil Nadu political parties, who presumably have little knowledge or concern about Jammu and Kashmir issues, have been invited to the PM's meeting. In his view the UPA was too far removed from the ground realities of the unrest to hammer out a solution.

Comment: Election Postponement?

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¶8. (C) It is difficult to foresee state assembly elections taking place in the current political environment in Jammu and Kashmir. Unless the political situation stabilizes quickly and there is a return to normalcy, it is likely that state elections, currently schedule for October, will be postponed. Such a delay will represent a serious blow to India's efforts to address Kashmiri grievances through economic development and transparent, representative elections.

Comment: Separatists Gain

¶9. (C) The biggest gainers from the recent political turmoil in the state have been the separatists. As recently as May, the strong consensus of political observers in the state was that the separatists had been sidelined because they had failed to deliver and due to a perception that they were on the payroll of the security agencies. The separatists had declined to participate in the elections for fear they would be discredited further if they fared poorly at the ballot. The current political unrest has revived the fortunes of the separatists, who have taken up the cause of Kashmiri nationalism sparked by the land transfer. The mainstream People's Democratic Party, which first detected the land transfer as a political issue and rode it in the early days, is a big loser as it has helped unleash a political environment which makes elections difficult.

Comment: National Electoral Implications

¶10. (C) The intensity and breadth of the protests in the Jammu region has taken the UPA government and most outsiders by surprise. It probably reflects the decades of simmering

resentment felt by the mainly Hindu residents of the Jammu region at what they perceived as discriminatory treatment of them and the fervent coddling of the Muslim-dominated valley by a succession of governments in Delhi. The Amarnath controversy is a winning issue for the BJP in the state assembly elections which are currently scheduled for November as well as the national parliamentary elections to be held before May 2009. The controversy will help underscore the long-standing BJP charge that the Congress Party will willingly sacrifice national interest to appease its Muslim vote bank. Many Hindus in the rest of India are no doubt giving some thought to the enormous fuss raised initially by the Muslim residents of the valley over a trivial 100 acres and about the UPA government caving in so readily. But, the BJP must be careful that it not take this issue too far. A Srinagar-based journalist told us that the BJP is "playing with fire" and sowing the seeds that will split the state into three parts -- Ladakh, Kashmir and Jammu -- and hence undermine India's vision of itself as a secular country where all religions and ethnic groups can coexist peacefully.

Comment: Searching for a Silver Lining

¶11. (C) It is difficult to find any positives that can emerge from the current political unrest in the state. Amid all the emotion and the violence, however, it would be wise to remember that the protests and the agitation that are taking place in Jammu and Kashmir are in true Indian political traditions. In India, when groups are displeased at some government action, they call a "bandh" (or strike), shut down commercial activity, block roads and railways, set fire to government property, and sometimes beat each other up with sticks and stones. This is exactly what has is happening in Jammu and Kashmir today. At the height of the insurgency in the state, such an emotional issue would likely have resulted in people taking up AK-47s and grenades and resorting to armed battle with the security forces. Today, they appear to be protesting within the Indian political system.

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